

Census Race Categories and the Mortality of Mixed-Race American Men in the Twentieth Century

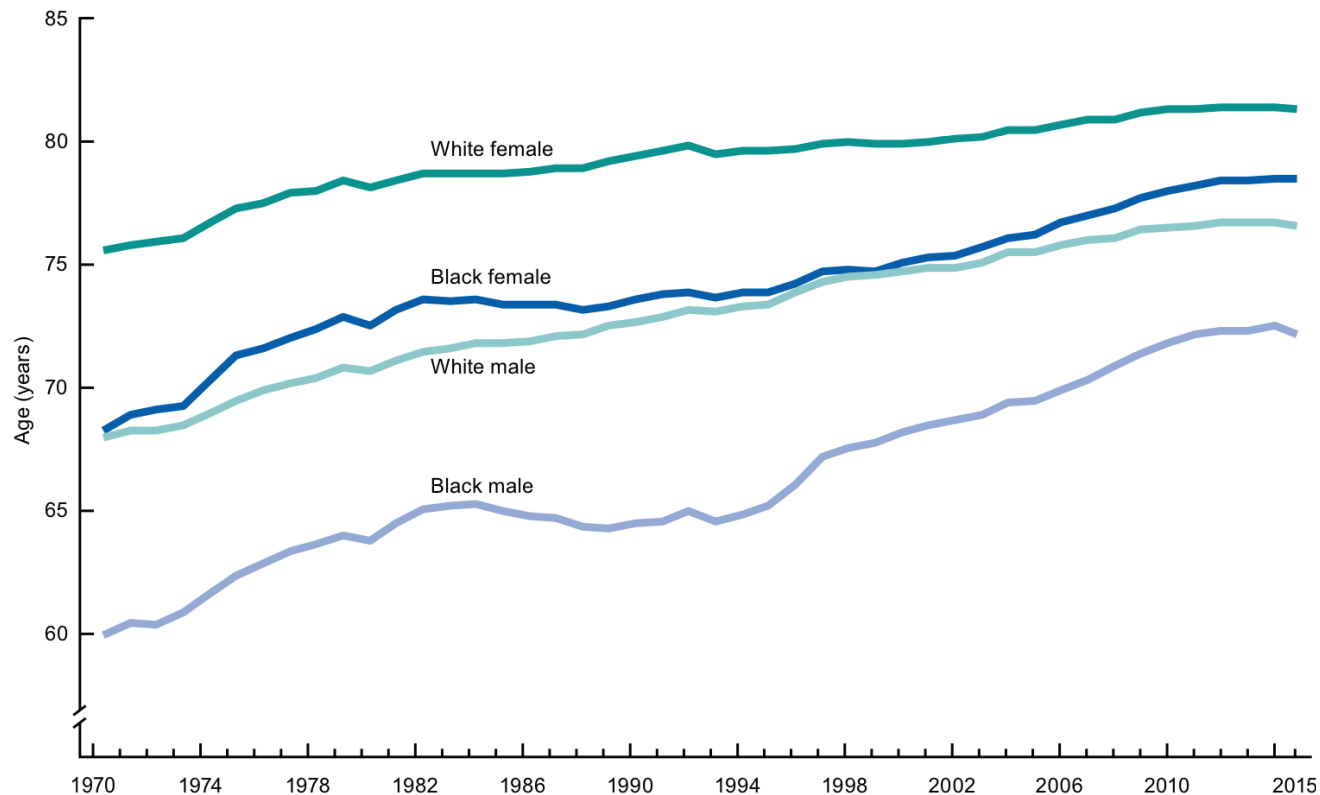
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Background: Race and Mortality in the U.S.

Period Life Expectancy at Birth by Race and Sex, 1970-2017



Source: Arias & Xu (2018): United States Life Tables 2017
NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality

Background: Mortality of Mixed-Race Groups

- Data are rare
- What can historical census data tell us about the social assignment of mixed black/white race status and mortality outcomes?

Background: Historical Census Race Categories

- “Mulatto” = mixed black and white
- Enumerated in decennial censuses 1850-1920
 - Enumerator-determined, appearance-based classification
- Relevance to mortality
 - SES differences
 - Color-based discrimination



Archibald Motley, *Mulatress with Figurine and Dutch Seascape*, 1920.

Data: Overview

Identify native-born white, black, and mixed men born April 1900-1920 on their first census (either 1910 or 1920)



Trace them to the 1940 census, which does not include a mixed-race category



Trace them to Social Security Death Master File (DMF)

Data: Details

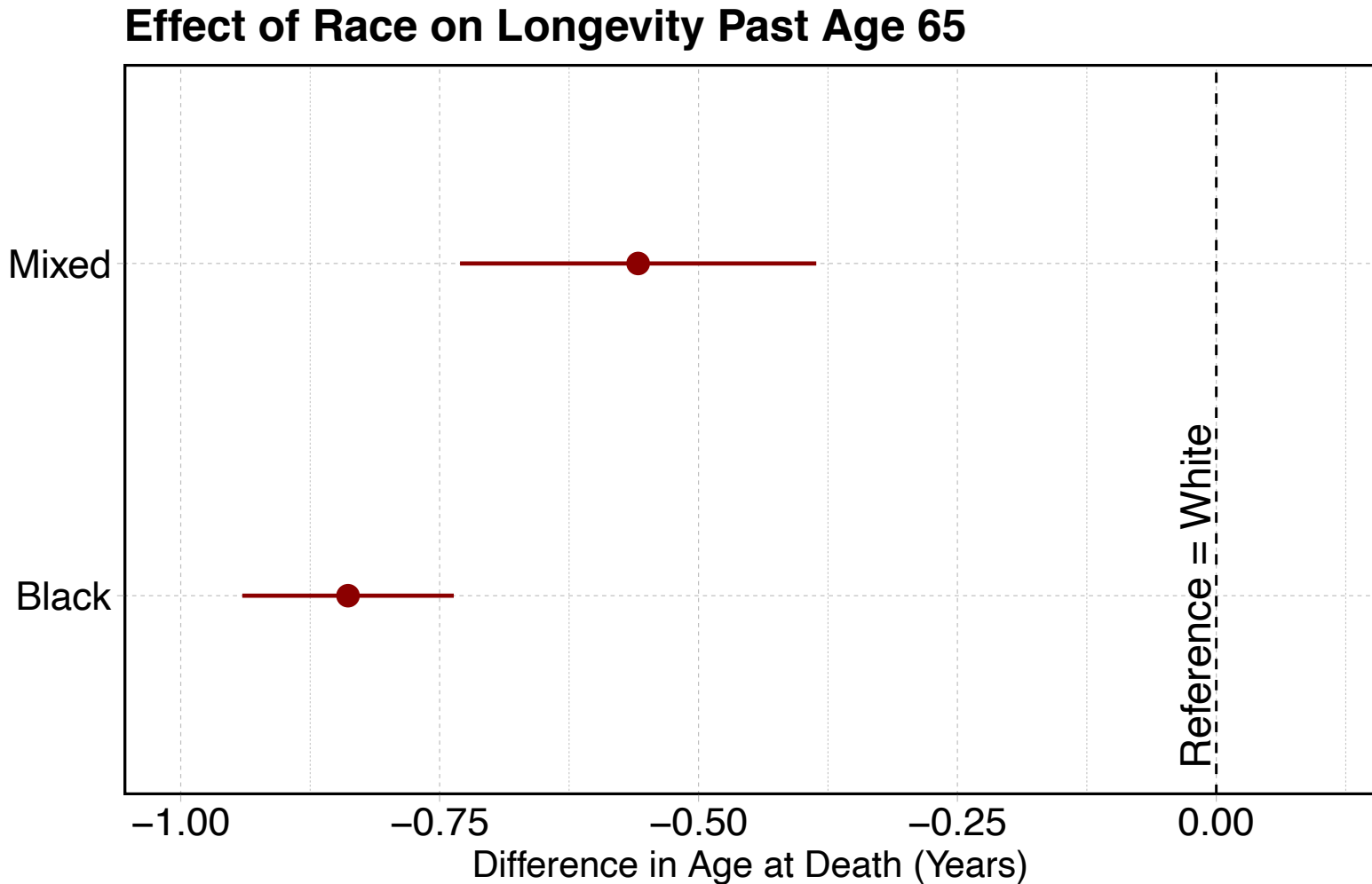
- IPUMS-USA census microdata from 1910, 1920 & 1940 (Ruggles et al., 2021)
- Census Linking Project crosswalks (Abramitzky et al., 2020)
- CenSoc-DMF mortality data (Goldstein et al., 2021)
 - Links 1940 census to SSA death records
 - Covers deaths occurring 1975-2005
 - Only include deaths ages 65+
- N = 930,334
 - 904,317 white; 19,306 black; 6,711 mixed

Method

- Linear regression on age at death with cohort fixed effects

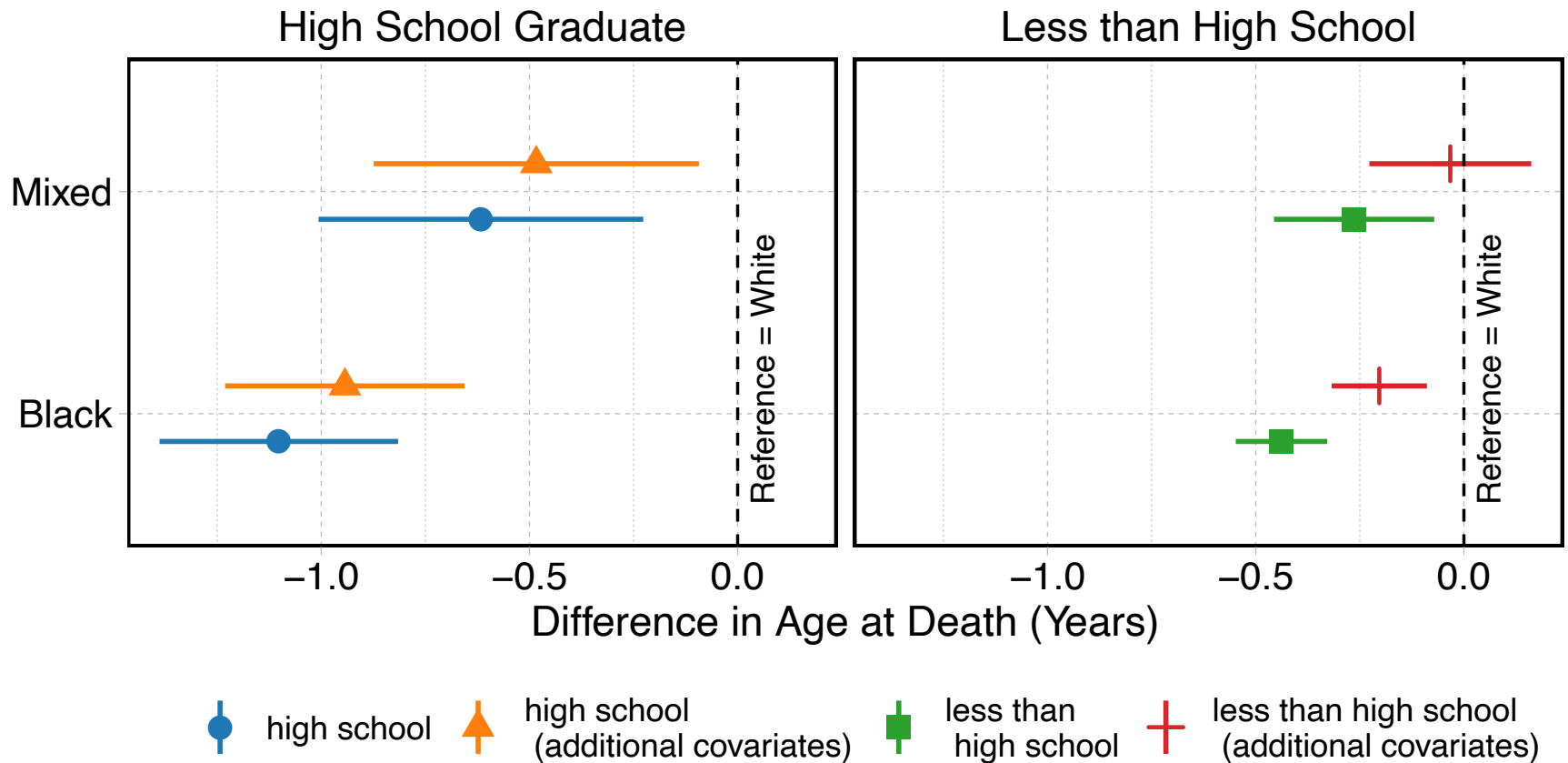
$$\text{Years Lived} = \beta_0 + \sum \beta_i C_i + \gamma_t t + \epsilon$$

Results: Racial Classification and Mortality



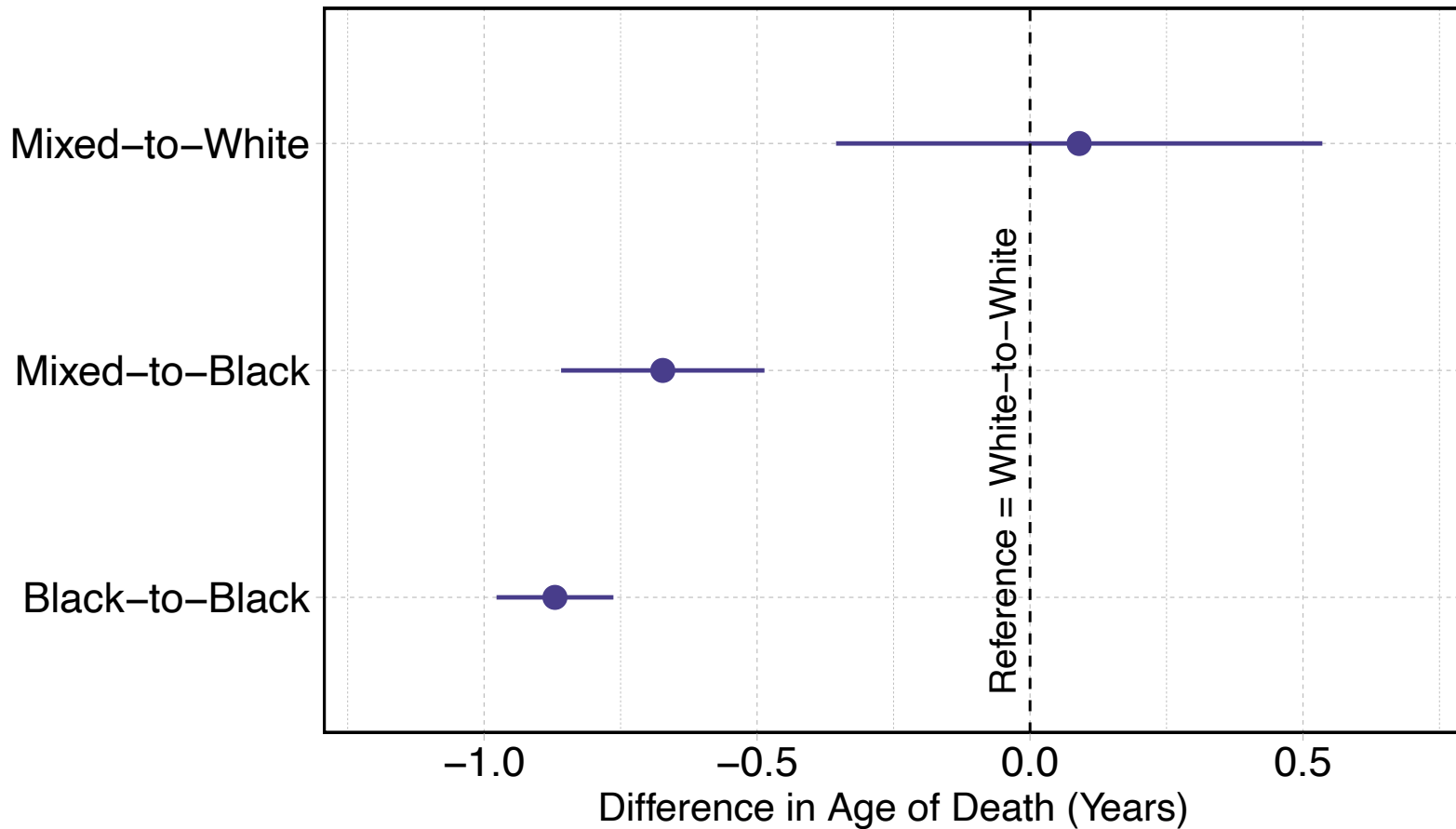
Results: Additional Covariates

Education-Stratified Models



Results: Incorporating 1940 Race

Effect of Race (Multiple Measures) on Longevity Past Age 65



Discussion

- In the aggregate, mixed black/white men have longer 65+ longevity than “single” race black men
 - Mortality follows a skin color gradient
- Mixed-race people become a less distinct group when controlling for various factors
- 1940 racial classification may suggest divergent mortality outcomes depending on proximity to perceived blackness or whiteness
- Limitations: potential for false matches, inconsistent enumerator perception of race

Thank you!

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